

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FEDERAL PROTECTION AREAS AUTHORIZED FOR THE ENDANGERED FLORIDA MANATEE

The endangered Florida manatee, mythical mermaid of ancient ocean lore, will get new protection against rising injury and death rates from boat collisions and other human-related accidents under new regulations issued by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The regulations authorize two types of "manatee protection areas" -- refuges and sanctuaries -- where water-related activities can either be restricted or prohibited altogether at certain times of the year. No specific sites have been proposed yet for Federal designation but they can be established by regulation in any water under United States jurisdiction, including inland and coastal waterways. The State of Florida has already established manatee sanctuaries in 10 counties and has adopted similar regulations, which can now be enforced by Federal as well as State agents. A violation of Florida regulations will be considered a violation of Federal law.

The only sizable U.S. population of this marine mammal inhabits inland and coastal waters of the Florida peninsula, with some moving into coastal waters of neighboring States during warmer months. Hunted to near extinction years ago for its meat and leather, the manatee's recovery has been hampered by human-caused mortality and a slow reproductive rate.

About 80 of the estimated 1,000 animals died last year, with power boats and other human activities the greatest identifiable cause. The docile creatures have also been injured or killed by flood control devices and fishing gear, while others have been harassed and chased into colder waters.

Nearly every living manatee bears cuts and deformities caused by boat propellers.

A warm-blooded vegetarian, also known as the sea cow, the torpedo-shaped manatee feeds underwater and surfaces frequently to breathe. Weighing up to a ton and lacking even speed as a defense mechanism, the manatee is often unable to evade oncoming boats and skiers. The animals are in greatest danger during winter months when they congregate in warm water near natural springs or power plant discharges in search of the 68-70 degree minimum temperatures that are essential for their survival.

Under the regulations, certain kinds of water-related activities may be restricted in protection areas designated as "refuges," when it is likely that a manatee may be harassed, injured, or killed. Water-related activities include boating, swimming, scuba diving, snorkeling, skiing, or surfboarding. Restrictions may include limits on boat speeds and the number of people in the water when manatees are present.

"Sanctuaries" are those areas where manatees are so highly vulnerable to injury that any type of water-related activity may be prohibited.

A new concept in protection designed specifically for the manatee and its unique problems, the protection areas have no relationship to national wildlife refuges, which are Federally owned lands.

The final rulemaking, published in the October 22, 1979 Federal Register, takes effect in 30 days. The action was proposed in the January 23, 1979, Federal Register.

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